

HOW TO READ SOCIAL SCIENCE

The concepts and terminology of the social sciences pervade almost everything we read today.

Modern journalism, for example, does not limit itself to reporting facts, except in the kind of shorthand, "who-what-why-when-where" news story that one finds on the front page of a newspaper. Journalists, much more commonly, enmesh the facts in interpretation, commentary, analysis of the news. These interpretations and comments draw on the concepts and terminology of the social sciences.

These concepts and this terminology are also reflected in the vast number of current books and articles that may be grouped together under the heading of social criticism. We are confronted with a continuous flow of literature on such subjects as race problems, crime, law enforcement, poverty, education, welfare, war and peace, good and bad government. Much of this literature borrows its ideology and language from the social sciences.

The literature of social science is not confined to non-fiction. There is also a large and important category of contemporary writing that might be termed social-science fiction. Here the aim is to create artificial models of society that allow us, for example, to explore the social consequences of technological innovation. The organization of social power, the kinds

of property and ownership, and the distribution of wealth are variously described, deplored, or lauded in novels, plays, stories, moving pictures, television shows. Insofar as they do this they may be said to have social significance or to contain "relevant messages." At the same time they draw on and disseminate elements of the social sciences.

Furthermore, there is hardly any social, economic, or political problem that has not been tackled by specialists in these fields, either on their own or by invitation from officials who are actively coping with these problems. Specialists in the social sciences help to formulate the problems and are called upon to help in dealing with them.

Far from the least important factor in the growing pervasiveness of the social sciences is their introduction at the high school level and in the junior and community colleges. In fact, student enrollments in social science courses are running far ahead of enrollments in the more traditional literature and language courses. And enrollments in social science courses greatly exceed those in courses dealing with the "pure" sciences.

What Is Social Science?

We have been talking of social science as if it were a single entity. That is hardly the case.

Which, in fact, are the social sciences? One way to answer the question is to see what departments and disciplines universities group under this name. Social science divisions usually include departments of anthropology, economics, politics, and sociology. Why do they not ordinarily include as well schools of law, education, business, social service, and public administration, all of which draw on the concepts and methods of the social sciences for their development? The reason commonly given for the separation of these schools from the social science divisions is that the main purpose of such schools

is to train for professional work outside of the university, while the previously mentioned departments are more exclusively dedicated to the pursuit of systematic knowledge of human society, an activity that usually goes on within the university.

There is presently a trend in universities toward the establishment of centers and institutes for interdisciplinary studies. These centers cut across the conventional social science departments and professional schools, and include studies in the theories and methods of statistics, demography, psephology (the science of elections and polling), policy- and decision-making, recruitment and treatment of personnel, public administration, human ecology, and many more. Such centers are producing studies and reports that incorporate findings of a dozen or more of these specialties. Considerable sophistication is required even to discern the various strands of these efforts, let alone judge the validity of the findings and conclusions.

What about psychology? Those social scientists who interpret their field strictly tend to exclude psychology on the grounds that it concerns itself with individual and personal characteristics, while the social sciences proper focus on cultural, institutional, and environmental factors. Those who are less strict, while conceding that physiological psychology should be subsumed under the biological sciences, hold that psychology, both normal and abnormal, should be regarded as a social science on the grounds of the inseparability of the individual from his social environment.

Psychology, incidentally, is a prime example of a social science area that is currently enjoying great popularity among students. It is possible that enrollments in psychology across the country are larger than in any other subject. And the literature of psychology, at every level from the most technical to the most popular, is enormous.

What of the behavioral sciences? Where do they fit into the social science picture? As originally used, the term be-

havioral science included sociology and anthropology and the behavioral aspects of biology, economics, geography, law, psychology and psychiatry, and political science. The accent on behavior served to emphasize observable, measurable behavior capable of being systematically investigated and of producing verifiable findings. Recently, the term behavioral sciences has come to be used almost as a synonym of the term social sciences, but many purists object to this usage.

Finally, what about history? It is acknowledged that the social sciences draw on the study of history for data and for exemplifications of their generalizations. However, although history, viewed as accounts of particular events and persons, may be scientific in the minimal sense of constituting systematic knowledge, it is not a science in the sense that of itself it yields systematic knowledge of patterns or laws of behavior and development.

Is it possible, then, to define what we mean by social science? We think so, at least for the purposes of this chapter. Such fields as anthropology, economics, politics, and sociology constitute a kind of central core of social science, which almost all social scientists would include in any definition. In addition, we think it would be conceded by most social scientists that much, though not all, of the literature of such fields as law, education, and public administration, and some of the literature of such fields as business and social service, together with a considerable portion of psychological literature, falls within the confines of a reasonable definition. We will assume that such a definition, although admittedly imprecise, is clear to you in what follows.

The Apparent Ease of Reading Social Science

A great deal of social science writing seems like the easiest possible material to read. The data are often drawn from experiences familiar to the reader—in this respect, social

science is like poetry or philosophy—and the style of exposition is usually narrative, already familiar to the reader through his reading of fiction and history.

In addition, we have all become familiar with the jargon of social science and use it often. Such terms as culture (cross, counter, and sub), in-group, alienation, status, input/output, infra-structure, ethnic, behavioral, consensus, and scores like them, tend to appear in almost every conversation and in almost everything we read.

Consider the word "society" itself. What a chameleon-like word it is, what a host of adjectives can be placed in front of it, while throughout it continues to convey the broad notion of people living together rather than in isolation. We hear of the aberrant society, the abortive society, the acquiescent society, the acquisitive society, the affluent society, and we can continue on through the alphabet until we arrive at the zymotic society, which is one that is in a continuous state of ferment, not unlike our own.

"Social," as an adjective, is also a word of many and familiar meanings. There is social power, social pressure, and social promise—and then, of course, there are the ubiquitous social problems. The last phrase, indeed, is a fine example of the specious ease that is involved in both the reading and the writing of social science literature. We would be willing to wager that in the last few months, if not the last few weeks, you have read and even possibly written the phrase "political, economic, and social problems." When you read or wrote it, you were probably clear as to what was meant by political and economic problems. But what did you, or the author, mean by social problems?

The jargon and metaphors of much social science writing, together with the deep feeling that often imbues it, make for deceptively easy reading. The references are to matters that are readily familiar to the reader; indeed, he reads or hears about them almost daily. Furthermore, his attitudes and feelings regarding them are usually firmly developed. Philosophy, too,

deals with the world as we commonly know it, but we are not ordinarily "committed" on philosophical questions. But on matters with which social science deals, we are likely to have strong opinions.

Difficulties of Reading Social Science

Paradoxically, the very factors we have discussed, the factors which make social science seem easy to read, also make it difficult to read. Consider the last factor mentioned, for instance—the commitment that you as a reader are likely to have to some view of the matter your author is considering. Many readers fear that it would be disloyal to their commitment to stand apart and impersonally question what they are reading. Yet this is necessary whenever you read analytically. Such a stance is implied by the rules of reading, at least by the rules of structural outlining and interpretation. If you are going to answer the first two questions that should be asked of anything you read, you must, as it were, check your opinions at the door. You cannot understand a book if you refuse to hear what it is saying.

The very familiarity of the terms and propositions in social science writing is also an obstacle to understanding. Many social scientists recognize this themselves. They object vigorously to the use of more or less technical terms and concepts in popular journalism and other writings. An example of such a concept is that of the Gross National Product (GNP). In serious economic writing, the concept is employed in a relatively limited sense. But many reporters and columnists, some social scientists say, make the concept do too much work. They use it too widely, without really understanding what it means. Obviously, if the writer of something you are reading is confused about his use of a key term, you, as reader, must be so, too.

Let us try to make this point clear by drawing a distinction

between the social sciences, on the one hand, and the so-called hard sciences—physics, chemistry, and the like—on the other hand. We have observed that the author of a scientific book (taking “scientific” in the latter sense) makes clear what he assumes and what he desires to prove, and also makes sure that his terms and propositions are easy to spot. Since coming to terms and finding the propositions is a main part of reading any expository work, this means that much of the work is done for you in the case of such books. You may still have difficulty with the mathematical form of presentation; and if you do not have a firm grasp of the arguments and of the experimental or observational basis of the conclusions, you will find it hard to criticize the book—that is, to answer the questions, Is it true? and What of it? Nevertheless, there is an important sense in which the reading of this kind of scientific books is easier than the reading of most other kinds of expository works.

Another way to say what it is that the hard scientist does is to say that he “stipulates his usage”—that is, he informs you what terms are essential to his argument and how he is going to use them. Such stipulations usually occur at the beginning of the book, in the form of definitions, postulates, axioms, and so forth. Since stipulation of usage is characteristic of these fields, it has been said that they are like games or have a “game structure.” Stipulation of usage is like establishing the rules of a game. If you want to play poker, you do not dispute the rule that three of a kind is a better hand than two pairs; if you want to play bridge, you do not argue with the convention that a queen takes a jack (in the same suit), or that the highest trump takes any other card (in a suit contract). Similarly, you do not dispute a hard scientist’s stipulations in reading his book. You accept them, and go on from there.

Until quite recently, at least, stipulation of usage was not as common in the social sciences as it is in the hard sciences. One reason for this is that the social sciences were typically not mathematicized. Another is that stipulation of usage in the social or behavioral sciences is *harder to do*. It is one thing to

define a circle or an isosceles triangle; it is quite another to define an economic depression or mental health. Even if a social scientist attempts to define such terms, his readers are inclined to question his usage. As a result, the social scientist must continue to struggle with his own terms throughout his work—and his struggle creates problems for his reader.

The most important source of difficulty in reading social science derives from the fact that this field of literature is a mixed, rather than a pure, kind of expository writing. We have seen how history is a mixture of fiction and science, and how we must read it with that in mind. We are familiar with this kind of mixture; we have had a great deal of experience with it. The situation in social science is quite different. Much social science is a mixture of science, philosophy, and history, often with some fiction thrown in for good measure.

If social science were always the same kind of mixture, we could become familiar with it as we have with history. But this is far from the case. The mixture itself shifts from book to book, and the reader is confronted with the task of identifying the various strands that go to make up what he is reading. These strands may change in the course of a single book as well as in different books. It is no easy job to separate them out.

You will recall that the first step the analytical reader has to take is to answer the question, What kind of book is this? In the case of fiction, that question is relatively easy to answer. In the case of science and philosophy, it is also relatively easy; and even if history is a mixed form, at least the reader ordinarily knows that he is reading history. But the various strands that go to make up social science—sometimes interwoven in this pattern, sometimes in that, sometimes in still another—make the question very hard to answer when we are reading a work in any of the fields involved. The problem, in fact, is *precisely as difficult as the problem of defining social science*.

Nevertheless, the analytical reader must somehow manage to answer the question. It is not only his first task, but also his most important. If he is able to say what strands go to make

up the book he is reading, he will have moved a good way toward understanding it.

Outlining a work in social science poses no special problems, but coming to terms with the author, as we have already suggested, may be extremely difficult, owing to the relative inability of the author to stipulate his usage. Nevertheless, some common understanding of the key terms is usually possible. From terms we move to propositions and arguments, and here again there is no special problem if the book is a good one. But the last question, What of it?, requires considerable restraint on the part of the reader. It is here that the situation we described earlier may occur—namely, the situation in which the reader says, “I cannot fault the author’s conclusions, but I nevertheless disagree with them.” This comes about, of course, because of the prejudgments that the reader is likely to have concerning the author’s approach and his conclusions.

Reading Social Science Literature

More than once in the course of this chapter we have employed the phrase “social science literature” instead of “social science book.” The reason is that it is customary in social science to read several books about a subject rather than one book for its own sake. This is not only because social science is a relatively new field with as yet but few classic texts. It is also because when reading social science, we often have our eye primarily on a *particular matter or problem*, rather than on a *particular author or book*. We are interested in law enforcement, for example, and we read half a dozen works on the subject. Or our interest may concern race relations, or education, or taxation, or the problems of local government. Typically, there is no single, authoritative work on any of these subjects, and we must therefore read several. One sign of this is that social science authors themselves, in order to keep up with the times, must constantly bring out new, revised editions

of their works; and new works supersede older ones and rapidly render them obsolete.

To some extent, a similar situation obtains in philosophy, as we have already observed. Fully to understand a philosopher, you should make some attempt to read the philosophers your author himself has read, the philosophers who have influenced him. To some extent it is also true in history, where we suggested that, if you want to discover the truth of the past, you had better read several books about it rather than one. But in those cases the likelihood that you would find one major, authoritative work was much greater. In social science that is not so common, and so the necessity of reading several works rather than one is much more urgent.

The rules of analytical reading are not in themselves applicable to the reading of several works on the same subject. They apply to each of the works that is read, of course, and if you want to read any of them well you have to observe them. But new rules of reading are required as we pass from the third level of reading (analytical reading), to the fourth (syntopical reading). We are now prepared to tackle that fourth level, having come to see, because of this characteristic of social science, the need for it.

Pointing this out makes it clear why we relegated the discussion of the social sciences to the last chapter in Part Three. It should now be clear why we organized the discussion in the way we did. We began with the reading of practical books, which are different from all others because of the special obligation to act that the reader is under if he agrees with and accepts what he is reading. We then treated fiction and poetry, which pose special problems that are unlike those of expository books. Finally, we dealt with three types of theoretical, expository writing—science and mathematics, philosophy, and social science. Social science came last because of the need to read it syntopically. Thus the present chapter serves as both the end of Part Three and an introduction to Part Four.